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ABSTRACT

A three-part review process is proposed as an aid to textbook selection for college courses. After an introductory discussion of the importance of developing standards and criteria for selecting course texts, the three-phase process is presented. The initial phase involves the establishment of departmental criteria for textbooks, which may be accomplished by circulating lists of criteria among members of the department or asking each member to list the five most important characteristics a text for a particular course should have. The second phase focuses on the development and dissemination of a checklist of criteria for textbook evaluation; the examination of proposed texts by department members and their evaluation of the texts on the basis of the agreed upon criteria; and the tallying of the faculty members' assessment of how well each text meets the department's criteria. The final phase involves the comparison of the texts with the stated goals and objectives of the course for which the texts are being considered. A sample of the criteria checklist used by the Department of Languages and Literature at Shelby State Community College for composition texts, examples of ways of comparing textbooks' coverage of particular topics with course emphasis on those topics, and examples of comparative analyses of texts under consideration are included in the paper. (HB)

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A THREE-PHASE PROCEDURE FOR SELECTING TEXTBOOKS: LESS THAN THE BEST BUT BETTER THAN USUAL

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A Three-Phase Procedure for Selecting Textbooks: Less Than the Best but Better Than Usual

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With the possible exception of the instructor, the textbook is perhaps the single most important variable which determines a college student's success in a content area classroom. It is certainly a primary source of information. The importance of choosing a good text, an appropriate text -- just the right text -- cannot be over-emphasized.

It is probably safe to assume that most college textbooks are chosen by departmental vote. After all, the instructors are the ones who will be using the text, so surely they should be the ones to select it. Too, they are the college's authorities in the content area covered by the text, so surely they should be the best element in the college to choose the text to be used in their classes by their students.

Professors who are to use a text should choose the text, but most instructors have repeatedly observed texts supported or rejected by their colleagues for the strangest reasons. On a recent adoption one prominent member of my department strongly opposed an otherwise outstanding text solely on the basis of the title, The Least You Should Know about English; she felt the

title suggested that the students who used the text could not be expected to know very much, and this would be insulting. On another occasion an instructor categorically refused to support a text because the front cover pictured flowers, complete with dew drops; he felt this was effeminate and therefore unsuitable for adoption; the contents of these texts were not considered.

One of my colleagues will never support a text that contains double columns of print; another rejects any with colored print; others are most concerned with shape, size, and weight. As unprofessional as these "reasons" may appear, at least these professors peruse the texts under consideration for adoption enough to know the title, whether the text features colored print, and if it has double columns of print.

Even more disturbing than these examples are the instructors who come to a department meeting scheduled for the express purpose of selecting texts to be used by thousands of students (and themselves) usually for a minimum of two years without even having bothered to look at the books <u>at all</u>!

Many excellent criteria are recognized for selecting texts; among them are readability (as opposed to reading level), inclusion of embedded aids, clarity, style, format, organization, and accuracy. It is my contention, however, that most of the specific qualities that make one text superior to others -- such as readability and embedded aids -- are qualities virtually unconsidered by many content area instructors. Perhaps this is because the professors were not concerned with these considerations when they were themselves students and do not recognize that many of today's college students' needs include high readability, embedded aids, etc. (Many college instructors do attribute tremendous value to reading level, but usually know practically nothing about how it is determined or how very misleading reading level can be -- a little knowledge is a dangerous thing!)

Content area professors can evaluate organization, accuracy, and clarity -- but only if they take the time to carefully study the texts. The point is that most content area texts -- those tools so essential to our students' success -- are often chosen for all the wrong reasons or for no viable reasons at all.

Based on personal observations as well as information gathered from other professors in many other departments and colleges, I would like to propose a less than idealistic but practical method of choosing content area texts; it's less than the best but

better than usual! The proposal involves three phases.

The first phase is to establish department criteria for textbooks. This can provide for the double-column, colored-print enthusiasts' opinions. Prioritizing criteria is not easy; at best a compromise is all that can be achieved. Circulating any of the many widely recognized and easily procured lists of criteria among the members of a department is desirable to make instructors readily familiar with possible criteria. This opportunity for an easy refresher should be provided before the date set for establishing a department's prioritized list of criteria.

Another possible procedure is to ask each member of your department to list the five or so most important criteria he feels a text for a particular course should have. But perhaps the best suggestion for certain results is to assemble the department members and forbid anyone to leave until prioritized criteria have been agreed upon! Formulate criteria for each course in the department any way possible, but be certain department textbook criteria are established.

After the first step, the prioritized criteria can easily be converted into a checklist, which provides the necessary means for completing the second phase. My department's criteria for freshman composition texts follow; here the criteria are shown in a convenient checklist form, which, when completed, constitutes

the second step in the review process.

Department of Languages and Literature

Composition Textbook Evaluation

Criteria Checklist

This checklist is based on the criteria for composition textbook selection accepted by the department in 1983. Please complete a form for each text under consideration for adoption by the department and return your checklists to the department secretary no later than two days before the meeting scheduled for textbook selections.

All checklists for each text will be tallied, and the results will be made available at the meeting.

1	unacceptable	3	good
2	acceptable	4	excellent

_____ 1) Content adequately covers the material necessary for achieving the stated course objectives

_____ 2) Presents concepts accurately and thoroughly

_____ 3) Presents content clearly and understandably

_____ 4) Reading level (as determined by SSCC) and readability (style, sentence complexity and word choice)

_____ 5) Interesting, informative, and challenging

_____ 6) Organization is appropriate to our course structure

_____ 7) Instructions are clear and understandable

_____ 8) Presents exercises and activities in a variety

of different and interesting formats

_____ *9) Student essays as well as works by professional writers are included

_____ *10) Length of selections

_____ +11) Concepts presented with illustrations and examples as well as explanations

_____ 12) Contains table of contents and index

_____ 13) Cost

_____ 14) Appearance -- type size, lay out, double columns, colored print, etc.

_____ 15) Suggests supplementary learning activities and related materials and resources for further study by students motivated to study beyond assignments as well as for students who have difficulties with particular concepts

_____ 16) Flexibility of content to accommodate different teaching styles

_____ 17) Text refers to practical, up-to-date, real-life situations to which students can relate and in which students might have an interest

_____ 18) Ethnic groups and male and female characters are depicted authentically; avoids harmful stereotypes

_____ 19) Teacher's manual available and useful

_____ 20) Durability of text

_____ *21) Includes advertisements

_____ +22) Answer book available

_____ +23) Contains unit on the research paper

*Applicable to reader and lit texts only

+Applicable to grammar handbook only

After criteria are converted to checklist form, each member is requested to complete a checklist for each text under

consideration. If the completed checklists can be required, the work is more likely to be completed. The tallied results for each textbook should be made available to the members of the department before the final adoption vote is taken.

Obviously, step two has ulterior motives. To complete the checklists, the members of the department must examine the texts being considered for adoption (unless, of course, they "fake it" and mark criteria at random as teachers often accuse students of marking instructor evaluation forms!).

Completing a form such as this provides a quick, organized method of reviewing each text, and its completion should ensure that texts have been perused. Also, most instructors will probably be motivated to participate in this phase of the review process so their opinions will be included in the tallied results.

If this procedure is followed, the tallies would not actually constitute a vote or decision of any kind; however, they would provide an assessment by the department members of how well each text meets department-established textbook criteria. The procedure also ensures the faculty's familiarity with each text under consideration.

The final step may be the most important. to complete this phase of the process someone must compare the texts under

consideration with the stated goals and objectives of the course for which the texts are being considered. Hopefully this is not too revolutionary! Determining the person or persons to accomplish this task may be difficult, but whoever is chosen should be respected, responsible, reasonably objective, and capable of compiling results in brief, tabulated form.

To tabulate text content with course goals and objectives, the department's main objectives for each course should be listed and an assessment of how well each text under consideration for possible adoption fulfills these ends should be determined. For example, if a composition course identifies seven grammar errors as being more significant than any others, the quantity and quality of explanation and the number of exercises for each of the seven should be tabulated. An example follows.

Comparison of Texts under Consideration
for Basic English 100

Major Errors	Exercises in Each Text	
	Text X	Text Y
subject-verb	100	68
verb form	80	85
verb tense	100	none
sentence fragment	90 9 paragraphs 1 essay	6 5 paragraphs
run-on sentence	100 8 paragraphs 1 essay	3 paragraphs
comma splice	illustrated with run-ons, but not identified as comma splice and fused sentence	included with run-ons
fused sentence		none

If the objectives of a composition course require that five particular rhetorical modes be taught, how well the texts under consideration discusses those modes and other particulars of significance should be noted. The following tables are examples; the page numbers make quick perusal by department members convenient.

Analyses of Texts under Consideration

for Composition II

Text Y

REQUIRED MODES	EXPLANATION OF MODE	WRITING TOPICS
process analysis	page 156 (excellent)	page 176 (excellent)
classification	page 184 (good)	page 201 (excellent)
causal analysis	page 208 (excellent)	page 231 (excellent)
argumentation	page 237 (good)	page 261 (excellent)

The essays in this text are interesting, but not as current as those in the other text under consideration. Their readability is possibly not as good as the other text. The length of essays varies widely.

Text Z

REQUIRED MODES	EXPLANATION OF MODE	WRITING TOPICS
process analysis	none	none
classification	page 117 (excellent)	page 152 (okay)
causal analysis	page 217 (excellent)	page 369 (good)
argumentation	page 271 (excellent)	page 322 (excellent)

The essays in this text are interesting, informative, up-to-date, and challenging. The readability is good. The length of essays varies.

If the department has agreed that a particular ten authors should always be discussed in a certain literature course, the coverage devoted to those ten should be tabulated, and, of course, how well any text meets the objectives of the course for which it is being considered can fairly easily be charted in a fashion similar to those illustrated.

As obvious as this phase may seem, such a plan is probably not very frequently implemented. Even if this step is completed, there is no guarantee that such analyses will override consideration of print color, title, and the picture on the book's cover, but perhaps it would influence the votes of some members of the department. Again, these evaluations are for the purposes of comparing texts and determining how well each text under consideration meets course needs.

Selection of texts for our college courses is probably more important than it has ever been, as it is generally agreed that our young adults are graduating from high schools less well prepared for college level work than students in past years.

The traditional well-read, versatile, competent college freshman is evident in fewer numbers on our campuses than ever before. The non-traditional, underprepared student with limited background knowledge and experiences are evident in increasingly large numbers. Even so, the time and effort devoted to textbook

adoptions -- always an all-important decision -- seem to be at an all-time low.

There are three phases to this practical review process that can help content area instructors make good text adoptions if goals and objectives for courses have been established. This procedure does not really assume familiarity with text qualities such as readability and embedded aids -- just knowledge of content. The three steps to be followed are establishing prioritized criteria for texts, completing individual text check-lists based on that criteria, and determining how well each text fulfills the stated goals and objectives of the course for which it is being considered.

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